

Safeguarding Animal Health

In the fall of 2000, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) entered into a cooperative agreement with the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) to conduct a review of its animal health safeguarding system. The review assessed the performance and efficiency of APHIS' Veterinary Services (VS) infrastructure as well as the activities, procedures, policies, partnerships, and authorities that comprise the existing safeguarding system. NASDA delivered its final report to USDA officials in November 2001.

The working definition used by NASDA for safeguarding, is that it is an integrated system for preventing, detecting, and appropriately responding to adverse animal health events. Adverse health events can result from the real or perceived impacts of diseases, pests, vectors or toxins on productivity, trade, or public health. Safeguarding animal health is a complex challenge made more demanding with an ever-changing global economy and international agreements.

The Animal Health Safeguarding Review provides a foundation for building a national safeguarding system that takes into account the activities of industry, States, and related organizations. VS is using the principles and recommendations contained in the review as guides in developing system improvements. VS expects to expand the scope of the 33 principles and 152 recommendations—to look beyond daily operations to the systems and dynamics that are the basis of its operations.

Implementing the Recommendations

To make the recommendations workable, VS assigned them to seven issue groups: National Surveillance System, Laboratory Systems, Exclusion Activities, Coordinated Response, Veterinary Accreditation, Organizational Dynamics/Communication, and Information Technology. A team leader has been assigned to each issue group. Team members include individuals from across APHIS program units along with State and university animal health experts.

To organize their activities, each group has prepared a comprehensive plan ensuring that they have taken a big picture view of their assignment starting with the end in mind. The groups created

vision statements and identified key issues to help ensure that they understood the overall intent of the principles/recommendations provided in the review.

Issue groups are now developing action plans to address these key issues. An action plan template has been provided to each issue group to guide the development of these action plans and ensure that each action plan takes into account relevant facts—identifying an accountable group or individual, resources needed, statutory and regulatory impacts, political sensitivities, expected outcome, and performance indicators.

Once each action plan is done, it will be submitted to a panel of VS reviewers to make sure all required elements are included and then to the VS management team for final approval. The plans will be posted on the VS Safeguarding Web site (www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/safeguard.htm) for public comment.

Implementation Progress Highlights

Some highlights of the progress made in implementing the recommendations include:

- Animal Health Protection Act becomes law—This Act consolidates and updates the statutory authorities underpinning APHIS animal health safeguarding activities. Safeguarding Review Recommendation #58 encouraged passage of the Animal Health Protection Act in order to deal with shortcomings in APHIS authorities.
- Homeland Security funds disbursed—Forty three million dollars was made available for State grants and cooperative agreements in May 2002. Monies are being used to initiate a network of diagnostic laboratories, strengthen State capabilities to respond to animal disease emergencies, strengthen State-level surveillance for animal disease and place tissue digestors in several States. Several Safeguarding Review recommendations identified funding as a critical need.
- National Surveillance Coordinator hired—Dr. Valerie Ragan has been appointed Assistant Deputy Administrator for VS, a position from which she will also serve as National Surveillance Coordinator. Recommendation #1 in the Safeguarding Review called for the establishment of a national surveillance leadership position.
- Formal Incident Command System used for first time—An Incident Command System was used by Federal and State personnel in responding to

the low pathogenic avian influenza outbreak in Virginia earlier this year. Several Safeguarding Review recommendations called for improving the management of emergency operations.

- National Animal Health Laboratory Network—Twelve laboratories have been selected to receive Homeland Security funding. These laboratories will establish a unified network of public agricultural institutions able to assist in identifying and responding to high-risk biological pathogens in the food and agricultural system. Both APHIS and the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service are involved with this process. Several Safeguarding Review recommendations identified the need to establish a national animal health laboratory system.
- Laboratory modernization—Design work has been initiated on several of the new facilities being planned in Ames, Iowa. Several Safeguarding Review recommendations supported implementation and full funding of the modernization plan.
- Veterinary Accreditation—A joint VS and American Veterinary Medical Association article on New Directions for the National Veterinary Accreditation Program was published in JAVMA in May signaling agreement on a program direction. Work is now progressing on developing the proposed rule to implement the new program and to develop training materials for practitioners. Recommendation #101 called for strengthening the Federal system of accreditation.

Additional Information

For more information see the VS Safeguarding Web site: <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/safeguard.htm>. or contact the implementation co-chairs or issue group leaders.

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